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ABSTRACT

The library system at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium) is decentralized and scattered throughout the multiple building campus, which itself is spread over the of town of Leuven. This paper presents an overview of a discussion at the university leading to the construction of a new central library for its Exact Sciences campus. Arguments are presented both in defense of a continuation of the decentralized library and those that were brought forward in favor of a centralized library. Also provided are some guidelines for the library's construction when and if approval was made. (GR)

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ARGUMENTS FOR LIBRARY CENTRALISATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Introduction

This paper gives a short overview of the discussion that took place at the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (Belgium), finally leading to the decision to construct a new central library for its Exact Sciences campus. After a sketch of the present situation, we give both the arguments that were used in defence of a continuation of the decentralised library and those that were brought forward in favour of a central library.

Present situation

The university library of the K.U. Leuven is organised in a rather hybrid manner, closely following the pattern of the university buildings which are scattered over the historical town of Leuven and its modern suburbs. The Central Library plays a key role with its majestic facade on one of the most important town squares. The collections in this Central Library consist of general reference publications in all fields of science and of the works related to the cultural heritage of the university and the region; it also acts as a depository library for the humanities. Here you will also find the general library administration, which handles general matters for all library branches (the common catalogue, external relations, etc.).

The more specialised faculty libraries are divided over four campuses, each with its own campus library service (Humanities, Behavioural Sciences, Biomedical Sciences and Exact Sciences). Each campus consists of several sectional libraries (in faculties or departments). They are quite independent in as far as budget, acquisition policy and opening hours are concerned. In the rest of the paper, we will focus on the Exact Sciences campus.

The group of Exact Sciences consists of three official faculties: the Faculty of Sciences (divided in departments for mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geology and geography), the Faculty of Applied Sciences (engineering), equally divided in departments, and the Faculty of Biotechnology and Agronomy, which only recently split up in departments. Until the sixties, all these units were supported by a set of small laboratory libraries and a few small faculty libraries. Around 1970 the university became more structured into departments (many in new buildings) and most of them started with a departmental library. Simultaneously the campus library service was founded, making, for example, deals for avoiding overlapping journal subscriptions. In many places, however, important book collections remained in individual laboratories, most often without adequate access for the broader university public. Over the years a few consolidations took place. First there was a merger between the libraries of Mathematics (Faculty of Sciences) and of Computer Sciences (Faculty of Applied Sciences). Next came a merger between the already unified library of the Faculty of Agronomy with the library of Botany (part of the Department of Biology in the Faculty of Sciences).

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At present day, this leaves us with the following library units:

- Mathematics and Computer Sciences
- Physics
- Chemistry
- Botany and Agronomy
- Zoology
- Geosciences (part of geography and geology)
- Social and Economical Geography
- Chemical Engineering
- Architecture, Town Planning, Construction
- Electronic Engineering
- Metal Sciences and Applied Material Sciences
- Mechanical Engineering

These are only the official library units, each staffed by a single librarian. In addition, there are still many unofficial laboratory libraries without library staff (at best the collections are supervised by a secretary). All these libraries are co-ordinated by a dynamic Campus Library Service, which takes care of the acquisition administration (the selection is still done by the individual units!), of the cataloguing and of the Inter-library Loan (ILL) service. It also has a couple of extra people that can be sent to the smaller units in case of absences in the regular staff due to illness or vacation. Most of these libraries are situated in the Heverlee subcampus of the university, within a 1 km distance of each other, with exception of the libraries of zoology and the geosciences: these are a few kilometres away within the old historical city centre.

A few numbers may give a better idea of the total size of these libraries:

430.000 volumes
3.050 journals
7.500 incoming ILL requests
6.500 outgoing ILL requests
20 km of bookshelves
445 seats
3.670 m² surface
5.000 students
1.200 academic staff

Towards centralisation

Although this situation proved highly satisfactory for many years, nevertheless within library circles the idea was regularly expressed that a centralised library would be able to offer a far better service to its users. Within the academic campus library commission (composed mostly of professors as representatives of their departments) a small, but growing, minority gradually became more and more convinced of this solution. The academic authorities signalled that they would be willing to consider this option, if its advantages could be clearly demonstrated and if a significant majority could be found within the scientific community to support it. A document was prepared and sent to all departments by way of an enquiry. The responses to this enquiry, however, were not conclusive. Nevertheless, the growing consensus within the campus library commission for a centralised solution led to a strong document and an accompanying letter to the rector. As a consequence of these actions, a special commission was created in 1995 with the task to investigate all arguments in favour of and against the centralisation. This commission worked for almost one year, and the result was an extensive file that strongly defended the construction of a new library in place of all the smaller ones.

Arguments for a continuation of the present situation

The commission noted of course the arguments that were still heard in favour of a continuation of the present decentralised situation. These arguments were mainly the following:

- The short walking distance between the library and one's office. In the present situation almost all researchers can find most of their documentation in their own building. They are afraid that a central library will automatically mean walking long distances.
- Personal engagement in the acquisition budget. The financial policy of the university is very decentralised. Furthermore most research groups often have considerable additional and more personalised income, either from scientific research grants or from industrial collaboration. The rising subscription prices for scientific journals have led to a strong financing of the libraries from these decentralised budgets. It is therefore natural that these research groups want to keep a strong hold on and close ties to their own library. They will be much less willing to subsidise a distant central library.
- Familiarity of the librarian with his customers. Close contacts grew in each department between their librarian and his customers. He knows the professors and senior researchers, and he is aware of their personal interests in matters of documentation. These people are afraid that the service will be much more impersonal -- and therefore less efficient -- in a centralised situation.
- Facilities for access. In order to alleviate the restrictions coming from the limited opening hours of a small library staffed by a single person, special facilities (like private keys to the library door for the academic staff) have unofficially been introduced in many places. It is obvious that these people are not looking forward to the cancellation of their privileges.

Arguments in favour of centralisation

In spite of the above considerations, it was nevertheless felt that there were so many more arguments in favour of a central library:

- The interdisciplinarity of sciences makes it necessary for many people to go back and forth between several libraries. Since interdisciplinary research is encouraged, it would be much more efficient if all scientific literature could be put together on the same premises.
- Up to now, all existing libraries within the Exact Sciences were strictly research libraries. This is strongly reflected in the collections, where very little material is present that can be of interest to the undergraduate students. Rising journal subscription prices often led to a neglect of book material. The libraries forgot their didactic mission and undergraduate students remained absent from the library. This problem was explicitly noted by the so-called *visitation commissions*, which evaluate the departments on a national level.
- The fact that at present all these small libraries are understaffed has the following disadvantages:
  - limited opening hours (as already mentioned, this is somewhat corrected by special access facilities for the local academic staff; all other clients and students are left out).
  - often closed for holidays: the social conditions are such that the number of staff holidays has been rising continuously; this makes it often impossible to find a sufficient number of replacements, and many libraries have to be closed down from time to time.
  - no specialised services: the single person staffing each library has to be versatile; he has to perform all kind of tasks, from manually shelving the printed material to programming the computers that become an unavoidable ingredient in a modern library. It is obviously impossible to be an expert in such a wide variety of tasks.
- Smooth implementation of modern technology. The modern evolution of computer technology and its impact on current library and information services is happening so fast that most individual librarians are hopelessly behind, unless they can work together and can build on a specialised information technology unit. Doing this in a decentralised way may not be impossible, but it is certainly much harder.

- The longer walking distances between research buildings and the central library will in the future be compensated by a decentralised electronic information delivery. Now through the library network, all researchers already have access from their private offices to a variety of bibliographic databases; for the same information, five years ago they had to go to the library to consult the abstracts or indexes of journals. Full-text journals will certainly undergo the same evolution. Setting up such a service, however, requires a specialised staff and cannot be realised by an individual department.
- Better external services. The community at large becomes more and more dependent on the expertise of the university libraries for their scientific information. More and more alumni from industry appeal to their old university for help with the challenges of modern information technology. 12 individual librarians can hardly provide such a service, it requires a centralised solution.
- More possibilities for expansion. For the moment, most departmental libraries are completely filled, with no prospect for expansion. Construction of a new building will, if large enough, allow for some expansion for all branches. At the same time, new uses can be made of the spaces that were up to now taken by the small libraries.
- Improved "visibility" of the campus. This is a local problem: the collection of new buildings that were erected at the Science campus in the sixties now form a rather anonymous group of faceless grey blocks. A new library building, if well conceived, could play the role of a meeting place and become the heart of the campus.

A concept for the new library

Apart from summing up all arguments in favour of this new building, the commission also set up some guidelines for its construction.

- Clusters: In order to prevent the anonymity of a very large library, the new building should be divided into a number of large clusters. Each cluster should consist of a number of related subjects and preferentially a specialised librarian should staff it. The following clusters are considered:
  - didactic cluster with books for undergraduates and general reference works;
  - biosciences (agronomy, botany and zoology);
  - mathematics, computer sciences, electronic and mechanical engineering;
  - chemistry, physics, astronomy, material sciences, geology;
  - architecture, construction, geography.
- Disposition of the collection: Since the total budget for the construction will certainly be limited, the idea was raised to divide the collection into sections with decreasing accessibility. The most recent works should be accessible in open stacks (approximately 250.000 volumes). Less recent books and journals should be stored in a compact system of about 400.000 volumes. For even older work some kind of depot was considered for an other 400.000 volumes; this depot might eventually be situated at some distance away from the library. The idea would be to work with a continuous flow system: when more new books are bought, this should be compensated by a shift of some older works from open stacks to the compact system, and from there to the depot. The total net surface required for the library (without the depot) was estimated at around 7000 m².
- Further requirements for the building and its operation were expressed:
  - an extension of the total number of seats (with the undergraduate students in mind!);
  - an instruction room with multimedia facilities;
  - diverse and specialised staff;
  - late opening hours and weekend service.

What has been achieved so far?

The first thing to be realised was the depot library. By a lucky coincidence we received an offer to rent the existing library building of a Jesuit convent, that had closed down. This building lies within 2 km from the campus, is fully equipped with solid stacks and has almost the required space.

A special site was selected for the main building in the ruins of an old cloister. Three out of four wings of the original courtyard are still in reasonable shape with nice archways; adjacent to it is an impressive old refectory building. The integration of the library construction with the restoration of this cloister will certainly not be cheap, but it will realise an old dream of the university and of the local authorities.

Through an international competition, the Spanish architect Rafaël Moneo was appointed to this special task of combining a modern library with a restoration project. The planning of the building and the preparations for the move and for the new organisational scheme will certainly require a further major effort from all parties involved.